

# Exploring Genre in the Novel

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Genre** can be defined as any of a number of traditional novel forms that are characterized by a treatment of characters, settings, plot, or style.

## HOW DOES GENRE SHAPE NOVELS?

Many novels fall into traditional literary categories, or **genres**, which help determine how the novels are shaped. Many genres have specific patterns of plot, character, setting, and style which novelists either choose to work within—or sometimes work against—for satiric effect.

### POPULAR NOVEL GENRES

The list below suggests a few popular novel genres and some of the elements that often accompany each genre:

**Western novel** “Good guy” vs. “bad guy” characters. Dusty small-town setting with hotel, saloon, jail, etc. Tensions rise to “shoot-out” climax at end.

**Gothic/horror fiction** Mysterious or supernatural characters. Deserted, eerie settings—often a lonely mansion or castle. Unexpected, shocking, and violent happenings.

**Detective fiction** Solo detective (or detective pair) works to solve a mystery, often a crime. Characters usually include a variety of colorful suspects. Many colorful settings. Lots of dangerous action.

**Romance or fantasy novel** Treats fanciful characters, often heroic, involved in events remote in time or place. Adventurous and fantastic action.

### TRADITIONAL NOVEL GENRES

Novels are also shaped by traditional novel genre patterns that have developed throughout the history of literature. A few are listed below:

**Allegorical novel** A form of novel in which characters, settings, or plot elements symbolize abstract concepts—faith, beauty, etc. (Two examples of allegorical novels are *Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan and *Animal Farm* by George Orwell.)

**Picaresque novel** A novel made up of episodes in which the main characters wander from setting to setting having adventures. (One classic picaresque novel is *Don Quixote* by Cervantes.)

**Bildungsroman** A German term for the “novel of education”—also sometimes called the “novel of initiation”—which concentrates on tracing the development and growth of its central character. (J.D. Salinger’s classic novel about the struggles of coming of age, *The Catcher in the Rye*, is a modern example of the *bildungsroman* genre.)

**The epistolary novel** A novel written in the form of a series of letters. (Alice Walker makes use of this genre in *The Color Purple*.)

## QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE YOU ARE READING A NOVEL:

1. Does the novel fit any *popular* novel genre? In what ways does it conform—or not conform—to expected elements of the genre?
2. Does the novel fit any *classic* literary genre? How does this genre help shape the characters, settings, or plot elements of the novel?